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WHAT MADE LIFE WORTH WHILE

By LUCY RIDER MEYER, A.M., M.D.

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It was Helen Van Voort's last month in the nurses' training-school—indeed, almost her last fortnight, for her long course would be finished December 20. She had thought to come to the end with great exultation; but suddenly life—especially a nurse's life—was turning not half worth while. Oh, yes, it had all been fine—the drill, the discipline, the science of it. Why, the three years had been equal to any three in college. But now nursing! *Just* nursing! Coddling rich and finicky people—she had been on “special duty” for three months—that other nurses would have coddled just as well if she hadn't been there! The outlook staled upon this girl, “the best nurse in the class,” as Miss Lenstill, the superintendent, was reported to have said to the board president.

Then something happened. The new assignments for nurses' work were read, and Miss Van Voort suddenly found herself snatched off her “special”—just at the crisis too—and plumped down in the Children's Ward. What could it mean? Venom, somewhere, she was sure. Common floor-nurse too—not even head. Just washing and dressing the babies and looking after the boys and girls, work any probationer could do. She, who had gone steadily through all the grades, and had kept the amphitheatre clinics longer than any other nurse ever did—the amphitheatre with its great lecturers and its three hundred “medics.” How she had enjoyed *that* work! What a delight of life it had been to walk calmly in among the crying women and half-frantic men waiting in the anteroom and bring order and confidence out of the chaos. “Hurt you? Well, maybe they will, a little. But it's to make you well! Think of that!” she would say. Or maybe it was: “Before the people? Yes, but they are all learning to be doctors. You needn't be afraid of them. And then”—with the air of telling them a delightful secret—“you don't pay anything, you know!” How she had loved to see the trembling smiles come back—to have these poor people cling to her, trust her. Ah, life *was* worth living, those days.

But now the babies! Well, she was glad, at least, that she hadn't flinched. Nobody should ever know how it had hurt her—not the nurses with their half-pitying, half-curious eyes—and least of all Miss Lenstill. Not a pulse had fluttered, not an eyelid quivered. That was the self-control training had given her, she gratefully thought. She had

stood steady in an ether collapse once—she smiled to remember how she had to take the “hypo” from the interne’s shaking fingers, for seconds meant life or death—and she stood steady now. At any rate, there would be no bloated bondholders among the babies, for it was in the free department. And the caustic “Why?” that still rankled she met with a grim parody:

“Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do or——”

She was deep in dressing-basket, scales, and babies the next morning when, “Miss Van Voort, Miss Lenstill would like to see you in her room.” The summons came in exactly the middle of the fifth baby.

Helen walked slowly down the long corridor, and there was not the slightest flush on her cheek as she stood, a model of respectful attention, at the superintendent’s door.

“You sent for me, Miss Lenstill?”

“Yes, my dear.” The voice did not sound at all venomous. “Frank Street Church has sent fifty dollars for the children’s Christmas, and I want you—— You see, the head nurse down there hasn’t a particle of time for such things”—which was well put, for both ladies knew that she had not a particle of tact, either—“and I want you to manage it. Do anything you like. Only—if you are willing—I’d like to have you report to me—here, Monday, at three. You see I don’t want to be left quite out of the fray.”

Miss Lenstill never knew why the color flamed up into the nurse’s cheeks so suddenly just then. There was a little further talk, and Miss Van Voort took her departure. But she stepped buoyantly down the corridor, her feet keeping time remorsefully to the contrasting rhythm, “Venom! Venom!—Milk of human kindness!”

Three o’clock in the Children’s Ward, and the routine work for the day was over. Bandages had been changed, little bodies cared for, little hearts comforted. Now Miss Van Voort stood in the middle of the boys’ room, paper and pencil in hand.

“Children,” said she,—how bright she looked, fairly exhaling happiness. Every feverish and crippled child looked at her and expected something good,—“children, Christmas is coming!”

“Oh, Christmas! Hooray!” cried Tommy Mulligan, bobbing his head up and down on the pillow. It was about all he had to bob, the rest of him was bandaged tight. Half the boys in the room took up the cry, and all were happy. Blue-eyed Carl, with both legs held fast in “casts,” danced a jig with his elbows, and Willie made things lively under the white bedspread with his one leg. The other leg? Ah, that

was why he was in the hospital. Little Peter Lidderinski had never heard of Christmas before, but all the other boys hoorayed, and so he did—all but the little fellow in the corner cot. He lay quite still, smiling a little.

“But now I’m afraid,” continued the nurse, “that Santa Claus may not know just what to bring us. I’m going to write him a letter. Do any of you want to send him any word?”

Every one of them did, of course, and Miss Van Voort’s letter, to which, with the consultations and much advice, she gave the next two hours, grew bulky and many postscripted. She took the pathetic medley to the superintendent’s room on Monday with a moistness about her eyes and a tender smile unbending her lips.

“I’ve such a list, Miss Lenstill. I hope the fifty dollars will hold out.”

“We’ll make it hold out. Read the list.”

“Well, every boy wants a knife, to begin with, and every girl a dolly. Then Willie, the street-car case, wants ‘two crutches with fuzzy red cushions.’ Red velvet, he means, I suppose.”

“Poor little chap! They’ll make him such a hero with his chums that he’ll hardly miss his leg—at first. But go on.”

“Peter wants ‘sixty great apples.’”

“What put that particular number into his head?”

“I think he’ll put the apples into his stomach all right, once he gets them. He’s chronically hungry. I think he never, in all his life, had enough to eat till he came here. Then Edward wants a puppy-dog that will catch rats. It seems he has a sick mother at home, and she can’t sleep nights because—but it’s too dreadful to tell.”

“I can guess it. Go on.”

“Skates, several pairs, and a train of cars—this last from Timothy, the tiniest boy of them all. It sounds Vanderbiltish, but I think he wants his cars done in tin. Then here’s a red wagon to draw papers in—Louis is a newsboy.”

“And the girls?”

“Oh, dollies galore, and of all complexions.” Helen turned over the leaves of her note-book. “And a ‘piece of b’ue wibbon,’ and a penny, demanded by one avaricious little soul. And a doll’s bed. And Nellie doubtfully wanted ‘som’fin’ to curl my hair on—an iron ring, you know.’ I assured her that Santa Claus was up on all kinds of hair-dressing. And one little midget wants a ‘ittie g’een turtie’—it seems she had a little green turtle once, and loved and lost it. And Mary wants a very warm shawl for her paralyzed sister at home. But Hettie—you remember the little typhoid? She’s going home to-morrow and was

crying when her turn came for fear Christmas wouldn't come to her home. She says it never did. I reassured her and coaxed her heart's desires out of her. Her mother is long since dead, it seems, and Hettie wants Santa Claus to bring her 'some 'tatoes and a mamma!'

The children had a magnificent Christmas-tree in the great ward, windows darkened and myriads of little electric lights twinkling in the dark foliage. Everyone had his wish, though Florida had to be scoured for the "ittie g'een turtie." The silent, smiling child in the corner cot? His gift had come a week before Christmas—a little white coffin and a spray of lilies in the waxen hands. But Helen told the other children about the good times folks have up in heaven, and they were all very happy for him.

Then, in the five days that intervened between Miss Van Voort's release from duty on the twentieth and the Glad Day, she visited the homes of the little ones. Oh, how much there was to do in them—what a world of work for someone's hands! Into Hettie's poor little home went, if not a "mamma," at least the "'tatoes," and the word meant everything good to eat and wear, and orders for a ton of coal besides—in baskets, it had to be, there was no basement in the house. And Edward's sick mother and Mary's paralyzed sister received such care and comfort as only a thoroughly trained nurse knows how to bring into the homes of the very poor. This life worth while? It was the red wine of intense happiness.

"My dear child, you ought to be a deaconess nurse," said Miss Lenstill to Miss Van Voort on Christmas evening as they were talking it all over. "It's a beautiful work. I should be doing it myself, only—there's a family reason."

Her face whitened. Helen had heard before of the dear mother in the asylum.

"A deaconess! Oh, they're so stiff!"

"Not in this country—not the order I know about. You mustn't judge them by the old sisterhoods."

"But the vows?"

"There are none. Its members are as free as air—they stay in the work only as long as they want to do so. Don't you see, Helen, it's simply a chance to do all the time just the work you have been doing these few days?"

"Oh, I'd like that. But——"

"My dearest friend is a deaconess, over on the East Side of the city. At least, go over and talk with her."

Helen went.